

Mark Ch.8 v.27-38 and 1Timothy Ch 3 v1-7

Our two readings for today are provided by Peter and Paul, respectively. Peter passed on to his friend John Mark, his account of three years he spent learning from Jesus. The second reading is Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding the church at Ephesus.

The twelve verses of our reading from Mark's Gospel contain 5 questions, various diverse revelations, rebukes and challenges accompanied by the walking of many miles.

In the preceding verses from Mark's gospel, Jesus and his disciples have been in Bethsaida at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee healing a blind man whose sight had been restored by Jesus in two stage. From there Jesus and his disciples move out of the Jewish area ruled by Herod, northward to Caesarea Philippi a journey of approximately 25 miles. Caesarea Philippi was noted for its worship of pagan gods, such as Baal and Pan and also the great temple of Caesar. Against this background of world religions Jesus seeks to ascertain the comprehension of his disciples regarding his

teaching. So Jesus asks his first question, 'Who do people say that I am?' If Jesus was physically present with us today he might well ask us the same question, 'Who do people say that I am?' That question could take us by surprise, we might want to blurt out something about England being a multi faith country. What if Jesus challenged us further about our families and friends. The people you know who do they say Jesus is? I can remember the Billy Graham rallies of 1954 not because I went to them, but because the newspapers gave extensive reports of the meetings. It was a year later speaking to someone who had attended, that I understood what it meant to be a Christian.

The disciples responded to Jesus' questions by saying that people considered he might be John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus turns the questioning, 'But what about you?' Almost asking if that is what the disciples believe. But immediately Jesus asks them a more direct question 'Who do you say that I am?' Peter is quick to reply, any thoughts that the other disciples might have are not elicited. Peter responses, 'You are the Christ.' The disciples are warned by Jesus not to tell this to anyone. Any early

revelation of Jesus could detract from God's plan which was for the true identity of Jesus to be revealed in his sacrificial death on the Cross for the atonement of man's sin.

Up to this time the 12 disciples had been with Jesus for 2 1/2 years, they had witnessed Jesus healing the sick and performing miracles. Jesus still had much to teach the disciples. He begins by telling them the first of his predictions about his death. The second and third predictions are given in Mark Ch.9 v.31 and Ch. 10v.33&34. The first prediction from Mark Ch.8v. 31 reads 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again'.

That was too much for Peter, he wanted none of it, his ideas for the Messiah were different, he was horrified by the fate Jesus had predicted for himself. Unfortunately the words of his rebuke are not recorded. Peter had been deceived by the devil to deny the necessity of the cross. Jesus rebuked Peter and responded with the words that he had used during his period of temptation in the wilderness. 'Get behind me Satan' and adding 'You do not have in

mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’ Satan had sought to flatter Jesus with the words ‘If you are the Son of God’ and then in summary to tempt Jesus with the following, satisfy your hunger, trust me for power and protection. We can be overcome by temptation, the important thing is to have a strategy for dealing with temptation. There have been times when I have found it necessary to say to Satan, ‘in the name of Jesus Christ get behind me Satan.’ Or in the words of the Message, “Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.’

It is easy to seek our own desires and to leave God out of our lives. If we look back over recent weeks we will know that leaders in various occupation have sought to leave God out of their lives. But I am aware too how easy it is to point a finger at someone and have three pointing back to myself. Some of you will have heard the Bishop of Burnley speaking on B.B.C. Radio 4 on Shrove Tuesday, the day that the Oxfam scandal broke. The Revd Peter North reminded his hearers that ‘shrove’ comes from the old English word ‘shriven, which means to be forgiven. He goes on to say Shrove Tuesday reminds us that moral leadership only has substance when

we start by looking honestly at ourselves. He also suggested that donations to Oxfam and other charities would fall, as they have done and that the only people who would suffer would those who are in need of aid. The Revd. Peter North finished his homily with the words of Jesus from John Ch8 v7, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'. This could make a good discussion subject !

After Jesus had spoken to his disciples we read that Jesus called the crowd and said to them; 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' Or as the Message says, 'Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am . Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how'. Jesus knew that the time was coming when he would have to set out for Jerusalem a distance of some hundred miles. Jesus knew from his heavenly Father and his knowledge of Old Testament scripture, e.g. Isaiah Ch. 53 that the vocation of the Messiah was to suffer and to die for human sin, and so be glorified. He was totally resolved to do His Father's will and to finish his Father's work which would be achieved in Jerusalem. Before setting out Jesus meets with his

disciples and the crowds that were following him and tells them that life would not necessarily be an easy road. His coming crucifixion began to fill his thoughts. It was customary for convicted Roman prisoners to carry part of their cross, usually the crossbeam to the place of execution. There was no easy way to do this, the cross could be awkward and heavy and we read that Simon of Cyrene had to help to Jesus. Letting Jesus be our leader could result in being guided into ways that we would never consider for ourselves. There can be times in our life when the choice is to follow our own way or to follow Jesus. But I can tell you from experience that the Lord will never let us down.

And let us not forget the other two questions in this passage of scripture 'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?' I will leave you to consider these questions.

Those of you who were at Joan Kingham's memorial service will remember Simon saying that throughout her life Joan had given of herself. And the more she did, the more God was able to equip her for the next task.

Michael's first meeting with anyone from this church was with Joan Kingham. It was this encounter that encouraged us to attend worship here. There was one thing that Joan did constantly and that was to learn peoples names and to make them welcome Sunday by Sunday, yes even in her nineties .

The apostle Paul was on his fourth missionary journey accompanied by Timothy when he decided that because the need in the church at Ephesus was great, he would leave Timothy there. Paul wrote to Timothy seeking to support him in his role of establishing the church in Ephesus. In 1 Timothy Ch1 verses 3 and 4 we read 'As I urged you when we went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that he could command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work which is by faith. The goal of this command is love.'

Those of you who use the IBRA notes will know that this year's theme is leadership and that this week the studies are focusing on leadership in the New Testament. Paul wrote to Timothy in the

words of our second reading for today . In the church at Ephesus Paul encouraged the appointment of elders/overseers who were to act as stewards in the church, and also act as teachers and preachers. But Paul was concerned about the character and moral integrity of people appointed to such a post. Paul's concerns should be ours when the post of elders are made in our churches. Paul knew that non Christians would judge the church and the validity of the gospel on the behaviour of those who call themselves Christians. Church leaders should humbly seek God's help to attain high standards of behaviour, none of us can ever be perfect. Harmony within the church depends on fair, objective and even handed leadership and having a vision for the church. The church needs upright, mature leaders in order to maintain its witness and its own internal harmony. I would like to think that Timothy in his turn encouraged Paul in whatever circumstances he was in. Likewise I would trust that all of us here will do all we can to support Simon, particularly at this time, in his role as Area Minister: Praying for him as he has the oversight of 8 other URC churches in the surrounding area.

Let us not forget that Jesus set his face to go steadfastly to Jerusalem, knowing that what awaited him was the Cross, knowing that it was his Father's will for him to die for the sin of the world. Jesus' question to the disciples and to us is, 'Who do you say that am?' Paul writing to the church in Galatia says this 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'.

What is your response?